Greece and its Colonies

Many Greek communities struggled to secure useful farmland on the **mainland**. As populations increased, the ancient Greeks were forced to look elsewhere to find reliable sources of food. One solution was to start **colonies**, or settlements in distant places, that would grow food and send it back to the mainland. The people sent to live in these new places were called *colonists*, and their main responsibility was to grow and secure food that could be returned to their community on the mainland.

mainland - the large, continuous land of a country, not including islands

colony - an area owned and controlled by a larger country that is far away

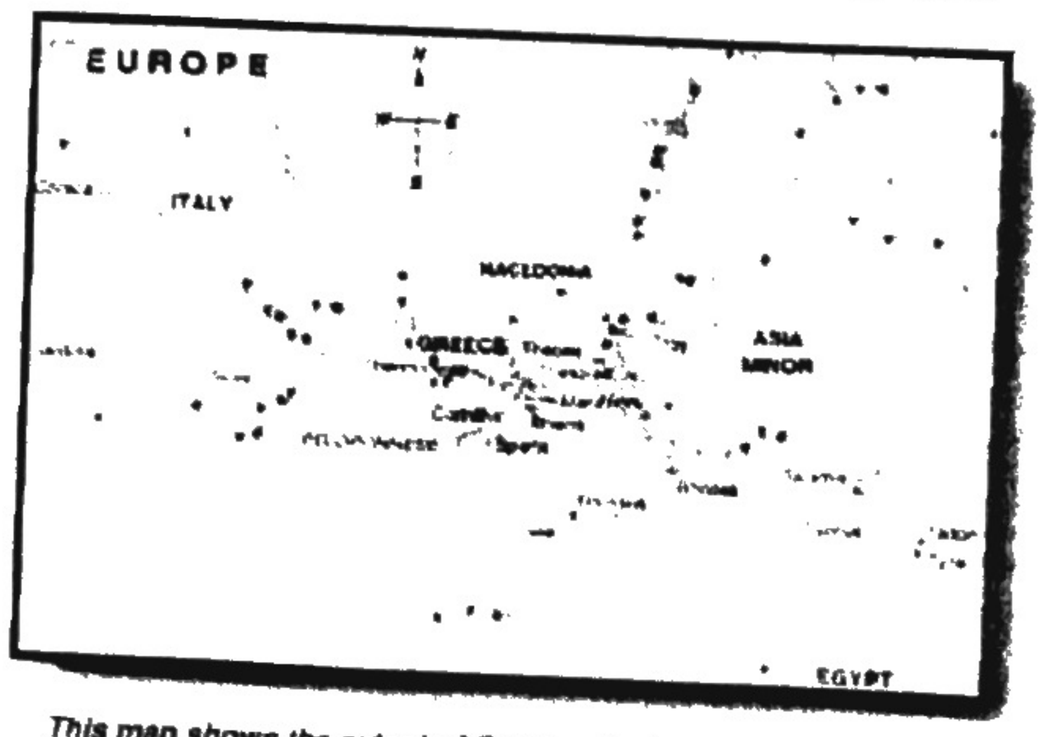
Setting out on a voyage to create a colony was a big step for a city-state. They had to make sure they were fully prepared for the commitment they were undertaking. As was common throughout much of Greece's history, these early people turned to their gods in order to bless their journey. First, colonists would ask the Greek gods to protect them on their journey. The Greeks would spend days, even weeks, praying at temples and performing sacrifices so the gods would allow their journey to be successful. Too, Greeks often sought out an *oracle*, a priest who was believed to be a link to the gods, in order to seek a blessing.

Herq, a Greek colonist consults an oracle about his upcoming voyage.

Colonists would then gather the necessary food and supplies for their journey. Many family members and friends would donate items, sometimes even giving valuable gifts and heirlooms as they feared they would not see this person again. To make sure they would have fire in their new land, colonists would keep a lit flame from their town's sacred fire located in the *Prytaneion*, the center of government life where the sacred fire from the gods was kept. Once the Greeks received their blessing, had the necessary provisions, and secured the sacred flame, it was time to depart.

However, the most difficult part of the journey was yet to come. Surviving the long sea voyage was a major challenge. Then, colonists had to find a good location to set up a colony. Ideal places would be near a harbor or around an area with good farmland. Sometimes they encountered local people who did not want them in their lands; sometimes battles would ensue to decide who had the right to the land.

The colonies established by the ancient Greeks would keep close ties to their homeland. The first colony created was called Iona in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Eventually, Greek colonies would spread to nearby Italy, Asia Minor, and North Africa, but eventually as far as Spain and Egypt! While these colonies were first intended to find a new avenue for food and wealth, soon they became hubs that actively spread Greek culture throughout the ancient world.



This map shows the extent of Greek colonies. Notice how far from the mainland of Greece that colonies were established.